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Age and generation dynamics in Victorian periodical culture

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Abstract

This article seeks to open up an exploration of the influence of age and in particular of generational identity as a key dynamic in the sociology of Victorian authorship, by exploring the barriers which have hitherto limited sociological investigations, and the potential that might be offered by digital humanities approaches. It argues that despite a number of important Digital Humanities (DH) projects addressing aspects of Victorian writing and authorship in the past 15 years, our knowledge of the sociology of Victorian authorship remains underarticulated. It points to the importance of developing scalable methodologies beyond the traditional 'bag of words' analyses of texts, and especially to the need for effective integration of literary and demographic data. By way of illuminating the sorts of questions that might be addressed by such methods and the potential insights that might result, the article summarises the outcomes of two related projects which have sought to consider age dynamics, one focusing on a sample of the journals covered by the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, and a second using data from the *Curran Index*. Both projects use the generational schema for the Victorian period proposed by Hewitt, initially in the *JVC* in 2019. In both cases, it is argued, the data lends strong support to the presence of significant generational patterns in periodical authorship, patterns which align in suggestive ways with current understandings of the sub-periods of Victorian Britain. The article concludes with some thoughts about the directions future work in this space might take.

Keywords Victorian authorship, periodicals, sociology, generations, Digital Humanities

1. Introduction

There has been only patchy interest in literary sociology within Victorian (periodical) studies. The main reason for this is the focus on text over authorship and its material conditions. It might have been supposed that the growth of Digital Humanities (DH) approaches, and especially the

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possibility of linking datasets, would have challenged these limitations. In practice, as Simone Murray has recently pointed out, much DH has remained unsociological, prioritizing the text itself over any contextual framing.[1] From time to time, attention has been called to this absence. In 2004, as she launched the *Curran Index*, Eileen Curran itemized a series of neglected questions: 'for example, were the contributors to a particular journal a small and close-knit group of regulars, a larger and only loosely knit group of regulars, a disparate group of occasional contributors many of whom appear only once? … Was there ever a norm? A relation between a journal's contributorship and its frequency of publication, intended audience, price?'[2]

There has been progress since Curran raised these questions. There is now a substantial and growing scholarship on the histories of Victorian modes of production/publishing,[3] and on individual writing careers beyond the usual canonical subjects.[4] Troy Bassett's *The Rise and Fall of the Three-Volume Novel* (2020) has for the first time effectively described the dominant field of novel writing.[5] Similarly, there is a valuable body of work attending to the terms with which Victorian women were able to engage with the literary marketplace, and the patterns of female authorship which could result.[6] Scholars have also begun to use GIS mapping to explore the spatial dynamics of literary production and circulation.[7] Likewise, there is work coming out of some of the recent projects designed to recover marginal voices, especially those developing substantial biographical dictionaries of Victorian authors, including the Digital Victorian Periodical Poetry and Yellow Nineties projects.[8]

But it is still the case, as Linda Peterson remarked five years after Curran, that 'a full history of Victorian authorship … has yet to be written'.[9] We still do not know enough about patterns of authorship or authorial careers in Victorian Britain, especially in periodicals and

[1] Simone Murray, 'Between Impressions and Data: Negotiating Literary Value at the Humanities/Social Sciences Frontier', *Australian Literary Studies* 38.2 (2023), n.p., doi.org/10.20314/als.aa3f8c1d48. One exception is Katherine Bode, *Reading by Numbers: Recalibrating the Literary Field* (Anthem Press, 2012).

[2] Eileen Curran, 'Additions and Corrections to the Wellesley Index: June 2004 Edition', Victorian Research Web, 2004 <https://victorianresearch.org/ci604.html> [accessed 10 July 2026].

[3] Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Aileen Fyfe, *Steam-Powered Knowledge: William Chambers and the Business of Publishing, 1820-1860* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Alexis Weedon, *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836-1916* (Routledge, 2016).

[4] Michael Anesko, *'Friction with the Market': Henry James and the Profession of Authorship* (Oxford University Press, 1986); Frederick Nesta, 'The Commerce of Literature: George Gissing and Late Victorian Publishing, 1880-1903' (PhD thesis, University of Aberystwyth, 2007); Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Peter Morton, *The Busiest Man in England: Grant Allen and the Writing Trade, 1875-1900*, 1st edn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Linda K. Hughes, *Graham R.: Rosamund Marriott Watson, Woman of Letters* (Ohio University Press, 2005). Mary L. Shannon, *Dickens, Reynolds, and Mayhew on Wellington Street: The Print Culture of a Victorian Street* (Ashgate, 2015).

[5] Troy Bassett, 'At the Circulating Library', At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837–1901, 2 July 2025 <https://www.victorianresearch.org/atcl> [accessed 10 July 2026]; Troy J. Bassett, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel* (Springer International Publishing, 2020), tbl. 2.9, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31926-7. Previous important work on this topic includes Allen Riddell and Michael Betancourt, 'Reassembling the English Novel, 1789-1919', *Journal of Cultural Analytics* (February 2021), n.p., doi.10.22148/001c.19102; Simon Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing, 1800-1919* (Bibliographical Society, 1994).

[6] Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change* (Routledge, 1989); Marysa Demoor, *Their Fair Share: Women, Power and Criticism in the Athenaeum, from Millicent Garrett Fawcett to Katherine Mansfield, 1870-1920* (Ashgate, 2000); Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Beth Palmer, *Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Alexis Easley, *New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer, 1832–1860* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Karen Bourrier, Dan Jacobson, and John Brosz, 'The 'Wilds of Brompton': Mapping Nineteenth-Century Women Writers' Early Careers in the Sociable London Suburbs', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 29.3 (2024), 363–82, doi : 10.1093/jvcult/vcae012.

[7] Karen Bourrier et al., 'Mapping Nineteenth-Century Writers', Mapping Nineteenth-Century Writers <https://victorians.ucalgary.ca/> [accessed 3 September 2025].

[8] Digital Victorian Periodical Poetry <https://dvpp.uvic.ca/>; Yellow Nineties Online <https://1890s.ca>.

[9] Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, p. 5.

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newspapers.[10] As several recent encyclopaedia and handbook entries starkly illustrate, we continue to rely on the accidental survival and the anecdotal to provide us with any sense of the conditions of authorship, the nature of authorial careers, and more problematically, the patterns of contribution to Victorian print culture.[11] Despite recent personographies, we do not yet have the sort of chronologically broad, consistently structured, and comprehensive datasets through which we might define and then investigate the sociology of Victorian literature. Our sense of the growth of journalism as a profession still relies on the variable ways that people self-described their occupations in the decennial census.[12] While we know that periodical publication was vitally important in the professional lives of Victorian women writers, we cannot assess the reverse: the extent of the significance of women writers in the output of Victorian periodicals. We do not know how concentrated or diffuse the 'stables' of authors contributing to Victorian periodicals were, or what the typical number of periodicals contributed to was for a full-time or a part-time writer. We do not have any real sense of the peaks and troughs of authorial output, the age at which authors were able to establish themselves in the literary marketplace, the frequency with which careers could be sustained over several decades, or the strategies of product or placement which could be required. We know remarkably little about simple age effects in nineteenth-century authorship, and even less about the extent that the characteristics of authorship vary if contributors are grouped into cohorts. Needless to say, it is not currently possible to measure how things changed during the Victorian period for any of the questions above, nor can we yet place these questions in a larger comparative field, by asking, for example, how authorial careers compare with those of editors or printers. In consequence, for all the progress that has been made, the analysis Richard Altick provided in his 'Sociology of Authorship', now over 60 years old, has yet to be properly superseded.[13]

This article looks into the intellectual drivers of this neglect, and highlights how the increasing availability of digital datasets can lead to novel approaches to tackle these questions, whilst also highlighting the challenges. It then explores these opportunities through a case study focusing on the role of age-effects and generation-effects in nineteenth-century periodical culture.

[10] The question addressed by John Sutherland, 'The Victorian Novelists. Who were they?', in his *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), pp. 151–64.

[11] Linda H. Peterson, 'Writing for Periodicals', in *Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, ed. by Andrew King, et al. (Routledge, 2016), pp. 77–88, and Linda H. Peterson, 'Periodical Poetry', in *Journalism and the Periodical Press in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Joanne Shattock (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 126–43. (As well as older examples, such as Robert A. Colby, 'Authorship and the Book Trade', in J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel, *Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society* (University of Toronto Press, 1995). For an illuminating but also frustrating example, see Dean Baldwin, *Art and Commerce in the British Short Story, 1880-1950* (Pickering & Chatto, 2013).

[12] See Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Clarendon Press, 1985). We know that the numbers describing themselves as authors, editors, journalists, reporters or shorthand writers increased from 2403 in 1871 to 8145 in 1891, and these figures can be broken down by region (showing as would be expected, the significant over-representation of London in these numbers); but we do not have any real sense of who these people were. The census is a case in point, both in terms of official definitions and individual self-definitions. As W. J. Reader has pointed out, the official definition of 'author' expanded steadily across the censuses from 1841 to 1911, but neither that, nor the real expansion in professional literary work, can account for the increase from 167 (in 1841), to 3434 in 1881 and 13,786 in 1911. Reader notes that in the 1861 census 'Author' encompassed 'Author, editor, writer' but by the time of censuses taken between 1871 and 1911 the term broadened to include 'Authors, editors, journalists'. In 1901, 'Shorthand writers' were included in the 'Author' category; see Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 209.

[13] Richard D. Altick, 'The Sociology of Authorship: The Social Origins, Education, and Occupations of 1,100 British Writers, 1800–1935', *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 66 (June 1962), 389–404.

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2. Barriers towards a literary sociology of Victorian periodical culture

The relative neglect of literary sociology is a product both of disciplinary dynamics and methodological challenges. Sociological approaches to literature have always struggled in the face of formalist suspicion of the reductive consequences of quantification and biographical contextualization. In general, the life of the writer has been adjunct to the text rather than a contribution to a collective biography. Where literary scholarship has been interested in authors, it has largely operated a hierarchy which places the novel at the centre and newspaper journalism at the periphery. Even where space has been prised open for more historicist analysis, this has been far more concerned with intertextualities than textual sociologies. The institutionalization of these constrictions is visible in the way that many crucial questions are hived off into the separate and often marginalized enterprise of 'Bibliography'.[14] Victorian periodicals research has been less bound by these approaches, not least because of the presence that attribution scholarship, in particular the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* and its supplementary successor the *Curran Index to Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*, has obtained in the face of the challenge of cultures of authorial anonymity; but it has not escaped their influence.

The methodological challenges of addressing these questions are significant. There are barriers of scale, definition, source and attribution. By 1899 Walter Besant estimated that the total number of 'writers' in Britain was as many as 20,000, and this no doubt seriously underestimates the numbers who made occasional, but nonetheless significant contributions to the periodical press. Estimates of the numbers of periodicals produced across the century start at 25,000.[15] Even allowing for the *Wellesley* and the *Curran*, anonymity greatly complicates any attempts to explore patterns of contribution, and information about the individual circumstances and experience of authors outside a narrow elite is scarce and hard to find. And these barriers are compounded by problems of categorization: how do we define 'novel' or 'author'; how do we distinguish between different genres, or classify different forms of writing? The sorts of detailed author records which survive for publishing houses like Macmillan or Chatto & Windus are much less common for periodicals, and almost non-existent for newspapers. Such data as does exist tends to be fragmented between attribution indices, large-scale corpora of texts, and demographic data of the sort provided by collections of biographies or the census enumerations.

3. Digital datasets as enablers of a literary sociology approach to Victorian periodical studies

Yet, the raw materials for a sociology of Victorian periodical literature do increasingly exist. Although the work of analysis has only just begun, projects stretching back to the *Wellesley Index* have gathered and made available an enormous wealth of data. The *Wellesley* provides data on over 90,000 articles and 11,000 authors across 40 of the leading 'serious' journals of the period. It is not without its challenges and limitations. It represents a particular layer of Victorian writing: male, patrician, concerned with politics and 'high thought'. Notoriously it excludes poetry even when present, and its selection of periodicals means that fiction is greatly under-represented.[16] And its status as a completed, book-form output means that even after the creation of the digital ProQuest version, the data has not been readily available for further quantified analysis or updating. In recent years, the *Curran Index to Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* has supplemented *Wellesley* with (as of October 2025) data from 81 periodicals, on 170,000 articles, and around 4000 authors,

[14] See D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). For all its merits, this is perhaps a feature of the sort of work championed by Laurel Brake and Anne Humpherys in the special 'Theory' issue of *Victorian Periodicals Review*.

[15] Walter Besant, *The Pen and the Book* (Thomas Burleigh, 1899), p. 1.

[16] Rosemary T. VanArsdel, 'The Wellesley Index Forty Years Later (1966–2006)', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 39.3 (2006), 257–65, doi.org/10.1353/vpr.2006.0052.

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has extended coverage to middlebrow titles like *Punch* and the *Athenaeum*, and has included more fiction and poetry. The *Curran* also provides (albeit unevenly) more substantial biographical information, and makes its data freely available in csv format. But the circumstantial shaping of its contents, the way in which it is dominated by data from the two titles mentioned, and the unevenness of its coverage across the period, all limit its ability to be representative of Victorian authorial and periodical practices overall.

An ever-expanding roster of digitized corpora, including of newspapers and periodicals, and a greater willingness on the part of publishers and data holders such as Gale, ProQuest and the British Library to open up the raw data to scholars, has greatly improved the potential for different kinds of DH textual analysis, from corpus linguistics to topic modelling. We now also have the benefit of a number of large datasets of Victorian authors, including the 6000 authors of Victorian fiction 1837–1901 and over 25,000 titles of multi-volume novels published 1837–1901 catalogued by Bassett's *At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837—1901*,[17] and the 2272 works of fiction and approximately 900 authors detailed by *British Fiction, 1800–1829: A Database of Production, Circulation, and Reception* and as well as those that do not have a specific nineteenth-century focus, such as *Women Writers* (spanning 1500–1900), *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*, and *Wikipedia*, which can now be datamined using the *WikiData* API.[18] Collected for different purposes, these initiatives considerably extend our knowledge of published texts and make available for the first time a substantial amount of biographical information about authors of the Victorian period. Yet these projects have remained content to provide personographies, rather than use their data to explore the patterns of authorship they might reveal. Members of the Yellow Nineties project have explicitly rejected a sociological (or as they term it prosopographical) approach to the analysis of authorial experience, primarily on the grounds of their unease at the way quantitative approaches often lead to 'flattening out differences and anomalies to create a typical subject'.[19]

The challenge to developing quantitative work which is sufficient rich and multifaceted to avoid such flattening effects is that the data remains fragmented, inconsistent (both within and across datasets), partial, and also in some cases very large. A comprehensive sociology of the Victorian periodical, and in particular of periodical authorship, thus requires both an extensive effort of data mining and augmentation, and a systematic effort of data linkage. It needs greater access to the raw data of existing datasets including the *Wellesley Index* (access is now available to the decennial censuses via the Integrated Census Micro-Data project).[20] It needs further enrichment of existing resources (both simple attribution, and the provision and encoding of key biographical data, e.g. of location, religious affiliation). And, above all, it demands effective methods

[17] Troy Bassett, 'At the Circulating Library', At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837–1901 <https://www.victorianresearch.org/atcl> [accessed 2 July 2025]; Troy J. Bassett, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel* (Springer International Publishing, 2020), tbl. 2.9, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31926-7. Previous important work on this topic includes Allen Riddell and Michael Betancourt, 'Reassembling the English Novel, 1789–1919', *Journal of Cultural Analytics* (Feb 2021), doi:10.22148/001c.19102; Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends*.

[18] Susan van Dijk, 'Women Writers', n.d. <http://neww.huygens.knaw.nl/> [accessed 15 October 2025]; Susan Brown, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, 'Orlando: Women's Writing', n.d. <https://orlando.cambridge.org/> [accessed 15 October 2025]; 'Wikidata', n.d. <https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Wikidata : Main_Page> [accessed 15 October 2025]. Attention on the eighteenth century has also focused on correspondence and the networks they reveal (see Chloe Summers Edmondson and Dan Edelstein, eds, *Networks of Enlightenment. Digital Approaches to the Republic of Letters* (Voltaire Foundation, 2019). For the nineteenth century, the explosion of print culture makes this the more productive site for exploration.

[19] Alison Hedley and Lorraine Jantzen Kooistra, 'Prototyping Personography for The Yellow Nineties Online: Queering and Querying History in the Digital Age', in *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities*, ed. by J. Wernimont and E. M. Losh (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), pp. 157–72, 158.

[20] The Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, 'Integrated Census Microdata (I-CeM)' <https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/icem/construction.html> [accessed 28 July 2025]. The project to construct I-CeM, led by Kevin Schurer and Edward Higgs, has applied standardized and consistent coding schemes to tackle the variability and inconsistency in the original census enumerators' books.

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of integrating the data from discrete and variously structured datasets: methods that are robust enough to supply a reliable picture while (given the relatively small populations involved and the significance of individual cases) not setting the linkage threshold too high to be feasible. And all this, of course, would be greatly enhanced by a community-wide accepted platform capable of making such advances available and thus bringing together contributions made by different teams.

The potential pay-offs are substantial. Some could be described as descriptive: a more accurate sense of the size, composition (including by gender, race or nationality, age, religious affiliation, education), and geographical distribution of authors; or the size, composition, and balance of the contributors to individual periodicals. Others are more analytical, uncovering some of the dynamics of the periodical press: including the career patterns of periodical writers (age of first publication, period of peak output, etc), the contributions that editors and editorial changes make to the character of periodicals, the emerging consciousness of authorship as a discrete and free-standing occupational or even professional identity, and the longitudinal demographics of authorship.

4. The role of age-effects in nineteenth-century periodical culture

We can illustrate many of the above benefits through a focus on age effects and generational dynamics. As age studies scholars have shown, age is one of the most overlooked features of how culture and society shapes us–seen as natural and inevitable, but highly contested, and undergoing notable change in the nineteenth century.[21] The interrelationship between age, period and cohort effects is a subject of research by sociologists and political scientists.[22] As scholars of a historical period, we are attuned to consider the significance of period effects. This study invites attention also to age and especially to cohort effects. To this end, we contend that nineteenth-century studies can benefit from re-engaging with the concept of 'generation', considered alongside class, race, gender and others, as a way to address fundamental questions of structure and agency, and offering a scale of analysis between the individual and society. Birthdate has substantive influence on life experience, and experiences affect us differently depending on when during the life course we encounter them. To fully understand how people's life-course and birthdate might have affected what they thought and wrote about, we need to pay attention not simply to yearly cohorts as if temporal change was consistent and linear, but also to the way that the varying pace of change (in historical upheaval, and in patterns of births) leads to generational clustering of people born within the same several-year period.

Generational approaches have struggled to gain traction in both historical and literary studies, not just for the formalist reasons outlined earlier, but also because of the unsatisfactory way generational analysis has often been deployed, especially in the sorts of crude schematics of the sort provided by Strauss and Howe in the 1990s.[23] A set of foundational concepts about social generations (as distinct from family generations) was established a century ago by Karl Mannheim (1928).[24] Mannheim developed a number of valuable insights, including his distinction between 'generation location', 'generation as actuality', and 'generation unit'.[25] Mannheim carefully articulated the contingencies of generation. Only being born within the same national

[21] Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age*, 1st edn (Oxford University Press, 2009); Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (State University of New York Press, 2009); Jacob Jewusiak, *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel: Growing Old from Dickens to Woolf* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Andrea Charise, *The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (SUNY Press, 2020).

[22] Herbert L. Smith, 'Advances in Age–Period–Cohort Analysis', *Sociological Methods & Research*, 36.3 (2008), 287–96. doi:10.1177/0049124107310636.

[23] William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (William Morrow, 1991).

[24] Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Paul Kecskemeti (Routledge, 1952), pp. 276–322. For subsequent re-appraisals, see David I. Kertzer, 'Generation as a Sociological Problem', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9 (1983), 125–49; Jennie Bristow, 'Sociology and the Problem of "Social Generations"', in *Studying Generations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Helen Kingstone and Jennie Bristow (Bristol University Press, 2024), pp. 17–40.

[25] Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', p. 311.

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and cultural contexts would signify a common 'generation location'. Only sometimes, through impactful shared experiences – Mannheim used the Napoleonic Wars as his prime example – do these shared locations develop into the shared outlook and identity of a 'generation as actuality'. Finally, Mannheim emphasized that generations are not monolithic: shared experiences do not determine shared reactions, so within any 'generation as actuality' there will likely exist several 'generational units' (such as conservative and liberal groupings), whose primary disagreements might be with one another.[26] Many of the problems with the use of the term generation in contemporary popular media and marketing come from eliding these different nested concepts.

However, Mannheim's dominance has also enshrined several less helpful assumptions. First among these is the notion that generations cover a 25–33 year spread of birth dates (a figure which seems largely to derive from the normal periodicities of family generations). Our work suggests, for sociological analysis, a cohort breadth of approximately 15 years (an approach also suggested by Ortega y Gasset and Julián Marías), on the basis that a wider span of birthdates renders any meaningful degree of shared and distinct generational experience increasingly unlikely.[27] Second among the counterproductive assumptions is the notion that generations supersede one another, in an Oedipal chain of parent-child conflicts.[28] This has recently been rejected both by Hewitt and by anthropologist Tim Ingold.[29] Instead, our work starts from the premise that societies comprise multiple co-existent generations, creating complex patterns of intergenerational encounter and exchange. Attending to these intergenerational dynamics helps to steer our analyses away from the kind of reductive 'flattening' of differences critiqued by Hedley and Kooistra.[30] Third, the question of whether generations are defined by underpinning structural factors, or by their own self-consciousness. Many scholars now routinely choose to accept Samuel Hynes's declaration that 'a generation exists when it thinks it does',[31] focusing on *generationalität* ('generationality')[32] or more simply 'generational identity'.[33] Our study seeks to return to the open question of whether generational cohort differences might manifest in empirical and even sometimes measurable ways, even beyond – and before – historical expressions of generational labels or generational identities. Just as the effects of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability are not solely confined to those who express identification with their categories, we contend that the same is true for generations. As a result, if we do not confine research on social generations to expressions of generational identity, we can chart a history of the phenomenon that reaches much further back than the First World War point of origin suggested by many scholars.[34]

Generational thinking was certainly present in the Victorian period, as we have variously shown.[35] However, such thinking was qualitatively different from the way we think about generations now, because people were not adopting explicitly generational labels or identities. This situation makes the Victorian period a good case study for examining the possibility of generational patterns operating below the level of identity, or even consciousness. Generational analysis might, for example, help to test the verisimilitude of the complaints (which appeared with increasing frequency in the later years of the Victorian period) that Victorian literary culture had begun to stagnate, ossified by the dead weight of early Victorian grandees who refused to die

[26] Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', pp. 306–7.
[27] Julián Marías, *Generations: A Historical Method*, trans. Raley (University of Alabama Press, 1970), p. 185.
[28] See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1973).
[29] Tim Ingold, *The Rise and Fall of Generation Now* (Polity, 2024); Martin Hewitt, *Darwinism's Generations. The Reception of Darwinian Evolution in Britain, 1859-1909* (Oxford University Press, 2024).
[30] Hedley and Kooistra, 'Prototyping Personography'.
[31] Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (Pimlico, 1990), p. 383.
[32] Jürgen Reulecke, *Generationalität Und Lebensgeschichte in 20. Jahrhundert* (Oldenbourg, 2003).
[33] Astrid Erll, 'Generation in Literary History: Three Constellations of Generationality, Genealogy, and Memory', *New Literary History*, 45.3 (2014), 385, doi:10.1353/nlh.2014.0027.
[34] Erll, 'Generation in Literary History', 385.
[35] Hewitt, *Darwinism's Generations*; Helen Kingstone, 'Collective Biography and Micro-Periodization: A Data-Rich Analysis of Recent Lives in the Dictionary of National Biography (1885–1901)', *Biography*, 46.3 (2023), 601–22; Helen Kingstone, 'Aging and Generations in Margaret Oliphant's Fiction', *Victorian Studies*, 67.2 (2025), 249–72.

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decently in good time, and leave the way clear for younger talent.[36] It might also help to pin down the nature of the sorts of period transitions that Walter Bagehot delineated in his contemporary history of the nineteenth century.[37]

A handful of preliminary forays into combining DH methodologies with quasi-generational thinking have been made. The suggestive recent work of Ted Underwood et al. illustrates the sorts of lines of investigation which such studies can open up.[38] By analysing the topic categories covered within a corpus of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary texts, Underwood's team have been able to argue that shifts in literary focus are determined less by year of publication than by author's year of birth and thus by 'cohort succession'. Our own work arises out of similar interests, but where Underwood and his team have limited themselves to considering authors' raw birth years, we are interested in generational groupings and their impact on the patterns of Victorian literature.

We deploy a schema of generational cohorts devised by Hewitt. This schema uses 'cohort' in its fundamental sense of a group of individuals. Traditional demographic analysis employs the term primarily for that group which shares a single birth year; but also for a group defined by a range of birth years, most commonly in the British context across the 10-year inter-censal range (for example, those born 1841–1850). 'Generational cohort' as employed here indicates a cohort in the latter sense of a range of birth years. However, this schema of generational cohorts is derived not from the arbitrary periodicity of the census, but from the hypothesis that is possible to discern culturally distinct 'social generations' determined by birthdate. We thus take seriously a (modified) Mannheimian attention to social generations (rather than simply to cohorts), and explore the possibilities of mapping this approach onto definable birth ranges.

The proposed generational ranges were produced from prefatory examinations of age-related groupings as they manifested themselves in nineteenth-century artistic coteries, and the clustering of contributor groups to nineteenth-century collections of essays, along with contemporary commentary on age or generational groupings. Hewitt suggests generational clustering across the birthdates of circa 1796–1813, 1814–1829, 1830–45, 1846–59, and 1860–1875. Rather than label these cohorts for the period in which they were born, his nomenclature indicates the period in which each cohort tended to be at the zenith of its influence. Hence the cohort born 1813–1829, aged between 22 and 38 in 1851, are described as the 'mid Victorians'; those born 1860 and 1875, aged between 27 and 41 in 1901 are the 'Edwardians', with the cohorts in between being named mid Victorian, high Victorian and late Victorian. Some of the formative influences and characteristic associations of each generation are suggested in Table 1. Mannheim warns against schemas in which 'the history of ideas appears reduced to a chronological table',[39] and the table is designed to be indicative rather than determinative. Overlapping periods of 'formative influence' reflect this spirit. By contrast, the cohort ranges do not overlap. Although individuals born at the margins between date-spans might present characteristics of the adjacent generation, these margin anomalies will likely balance themselves out.

The modified Lexis diagram (Figure 1) represents the constitutive pattern of historical period, age and cohort boundaries, and in particular emphasizes the extent to which generational succession was not concatenated, that is, not a linear chain of substitution of one cohort by the next, but a multi-layered process in which several generations of adults co-existed at any one time.

[36] On earlier manifestations of this complaint, see David McAllister, *Imagining the Dead in British Literature and Culture, 1790–1848* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), doi:10.1007/978-3-319-97731-7.

[37] For example the way his essays and reviews articulated a watershed around 1830, in which a generation 'who did not remember the horrors of the French Revolution, and who had been teased to death by hearing their parents talk about them' came to influence affairs; Walter Bagehot, 'Lord Althorpe and the Reform Act of 1832', *Fortnightly Review*, n.s 20, (1876), 584.

[38] Ted Underwood et al., 'Cohort Succession Explains Most Change in Literary Culture', *Sociological Science*, 9 (May 2022), 184–205, doi.org/10.15195/v9.a8.

[39] Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', p. 278.

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Table 1 Martin Hewitt's schema of nineteenth-century generational cohorts.

	Birth Range	Formative	Influences	Associations
	c. 1750–68	1774–89	American Independence; Methodist revival	Anti-Slavery; Clapham Sect; Napoleonic era radicalism
Revolutionary	1768–81	1789–1801	French Revolution	SDUK (1825); First Generation Romanticism
Late Georgian	1782–94	1800–19	Napoleonic Wars	Second generation Romanticism; Analytical Society; Philosophic Radicals
Early Victorian	1795–1813	1815–32	Waterloo; Peterloo; deep time; Parliamentary Reform	Tractarians; evolutionary thought Liberal Anglicanism; Manchester School
Mid-Victorian	1814–29	1832–51	Carlyle, German higher criticism; Hungry Forties; Corn Law repeal	Pre-Raphaelites; Christian Socialism; X-Club; Langham Place; Alpine Club; Metaphysical Society
High Victorian	1830–45	1848–67	1848; Great Exhibition; Crimea; *Risorgimento*; Darwin; Challenge of 'democracy'	British idealism; Arts and Crafts Movement; Aestheticism; Society for Psychical Research
Late Victorian	1846–59	1865–85	Franco-Prussian War; Darwinism	Fabians; NUWSS; Lux Mundi; Socialism; imperialism; Synthetic Society
Edwardian	1860–75	1880s/90s	Mass market; scramble for Africa; fin de siècle	Decadents; New Liberals
Modernist	1876–90	*c*. 1897–1918	Anti-Victorianism; Boer War; World War I	Bloomsbury; Camden Town Group; Vorticists

In the rest of this article we summarize two pilot projects that focus on age- and cohort-effects in Victorian periodical literature, testing the applicability of this schema and the insights it might help to open up, and illustrating the potential for the sociology of authorship to extend our understandings both of periodicals and the wider literary culture.

Project 1, led by Martin Hewitt and funded by the University of Huddersfield, harvested and analysed data from the *Wellesley Index*.[40] The follow-up Project 2, led by Helen Kingstone in collaboration with Martin Hewitt and Pieter Francois, with British Academy funding, undertook

[40] For a brief summary see <https://profmartinhewitt.com/the-wellesley-index-and-the-pattern-of-intellectual-culture-in-victorian-britain/>.

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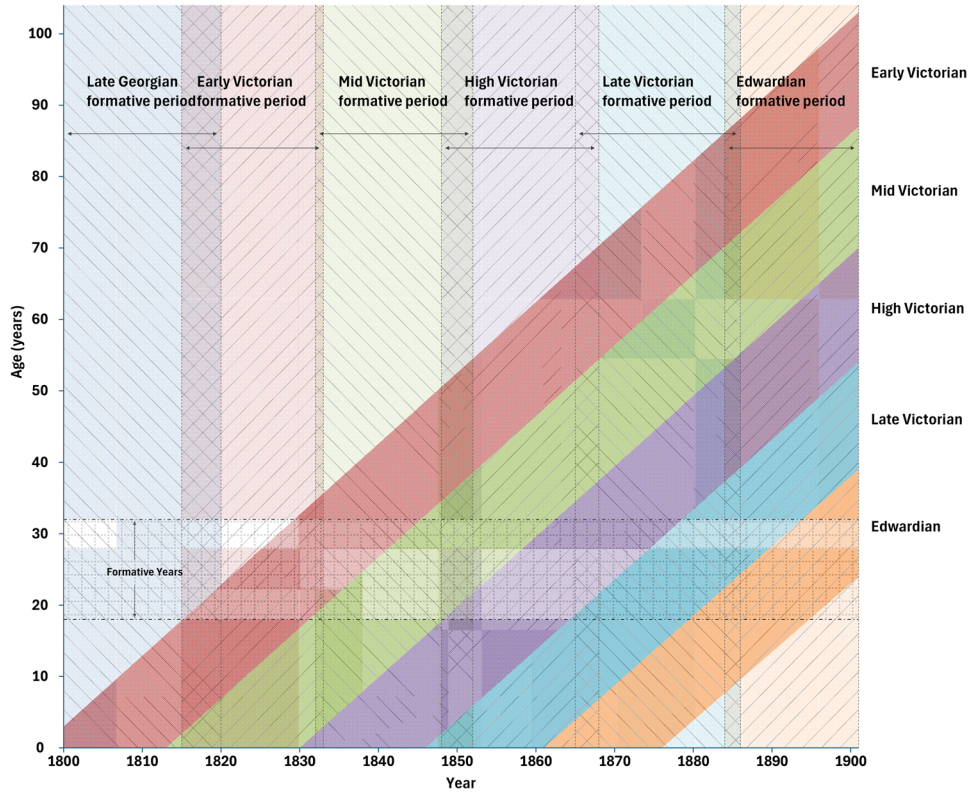


Figure 1 Victorian generations: a modified Lexis diagram.

equivalent analyses on data from the *Curran Index*.[41] This was selected as providing equivalent data to the *Wellesley Index*, but with the advantage of being non-proprietary, enabling access to the raw data.[42] Together the two projects examine the authorship patterns of *c*. 5000 periodical contributors across 10 distinct periodicals. We do not claim that these periodicals either individually or collectively are straightforwardly representative of Victorian periodicals. We focused on periodicals (discussed below) that lasted for decades, which itself was exceptional, potentially introducing an element of 'survivor bias' into the data whose age patterns we are examining. But the popularity of these titles (which their persistence reflects), the significant readership they obtained, and the attention that they garnered across Victorian periodical and newspaper culture, gives them a significance beyond mere length of survival.

5. Project 1: *Wellesley Index* data

Hewitt selected journals from the *Wellesley Index* with a view to obtaining roughly equal numbers across the period, some breadth in periodical type, and a sufficient number of discrete titles to mitigate the potential effects of individual changes of editor or editorial policy. Periodicals selected included the two leading nineteenth-century quarterlies, the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, published throughout the period; two shorter-lived quarterlies, the *Westminster Review* and the *London Quarterly*, balanced with the more literary *Ainsworth's Magazine*, *Fraser's Magazine* and two of the new monthlies appearing after 1860, *Macmillan's Magazine* and *The Nineteenth*

[41] The project also sought to enrich periodical authorship data through record linkage between the *Curran Index* and I-CeM. This work is still ongoing; its findings will be shared through future publications.

[42] Grateful thanks to the *Curran Index* editors, Emily Middleton and Lars Atkin, for access to the full dataset.

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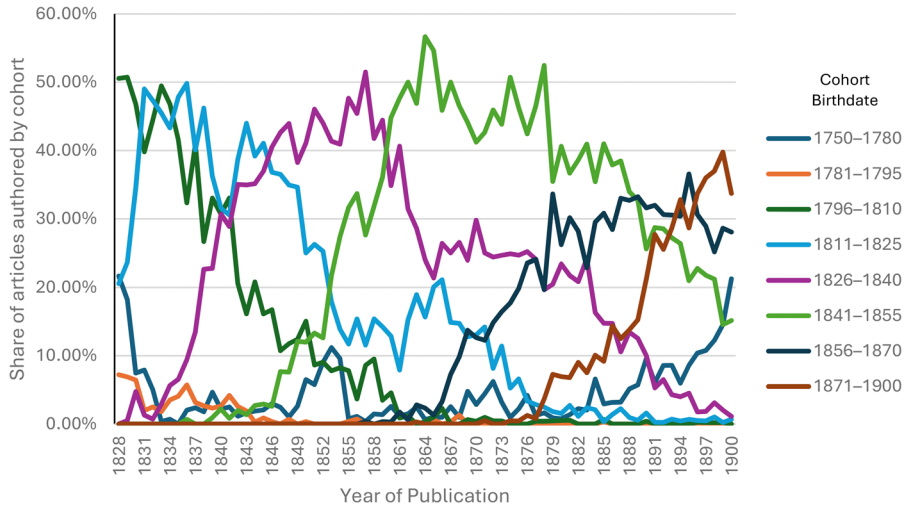


Figure 2 Periodical authorship in selected *Wellesley Index* titles by arbitrary 15-year cohort.

Century. Politically this allowed coverage to range from the staunchly conservative *Blackwood's* to the much more radical *Westminster Review* and *Nineteenth Century*. Although the extent to which authorship was concentrated in a core group of contributors varied, all these journals commissioned authors to write on subjects drawing on their particular expertise or experience, so that that the resulting patterns reflect judgements about the currency of particular topics and the cultural relevance of particular writers.

Hewitt made a Microsoft Access database of the selected journals' articles by periodical and author, which (ignoring items where authorship could not be ascertained), provided just under 24,000 items, attributed to 4600 distinct individuals. The *Wellesley Index* provides minimal biographical information, but does provide life dates where the Wellesley team were able to ascertain them. Of this 4600-strong sample, over 1000 lacked birthdates in the published *Wellesley* volumes. Work embodied in the *Curran Index* and subsequent supplementary research using especially digitized census information and newspapers has reduced this number by more than half, so that the sample ultimately contained data relating to over 4000 authors and 26,000 items. Figures 2 and 3 show the proportion of the total number of articles known to have been written by authors from each generational cohort, in each year from 1828 to 1900 (three-year rolling averages). Figure 2 shows a random set of 15-year-long cohorts (with the first cohort having the birth years 1776–1790, and onwards from there; Figure 3 presents results for the schema identified above). Juxtaposing the two graphs shows the affordances of allocating articles on the basis of their authorship to the hypothesized generational cohorts rather than to an arbitrary set of 15-year cohorts.

In the first place the generational grouping produces a more coherent pattern of rise, predominance and decline than is the case for arbitrary 15-year cohorts.[43] Any demographic data tracked chronologically in this way will offer a set of cycles of rise and fall as the cohort emerges into adulthood and then ages and dies (in the form we have it, the data does not indicate whether this is primarily a function of fewer active authors as generations age, or of a reduction in average

[43] This largely aligns with David McAllister's qualitative analysis of this phenomenon in *Dombey and Son*, though McAllister identifies the dominant generation as the post-Napoleonic baby boom (i.e. what here we call 'Mid-Victorians'), and those frustrated by lack of promotion opportunities in mid-life as its successor (the 'High Victorians'). David McAllister, 'Retrospection, Regret, and Contingency in Dickens's Late Midlives', *Age, Culture, Humanities*, 5 (April 2021), n.p. <https://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/retrospection-regret-and-contingency-in-dickenss-late-midlives/>.

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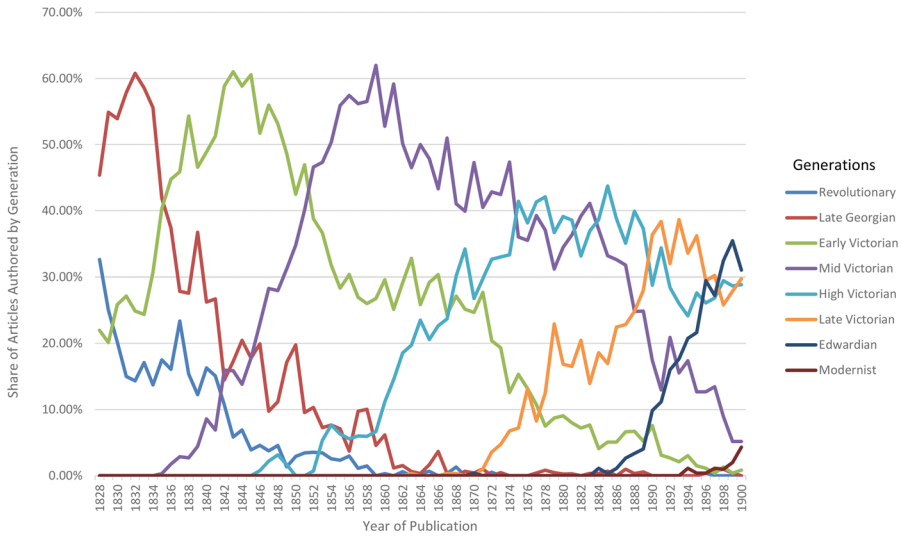


Figure 3 Periodical authorship in selected *Wellesley Index* titles by generation.

productivity, a separate question worth further investigation). But the generational schema is more regular than the random schema, with more marked successions (as indicated by the area between the highest curve and the second-highest curve, which indicates the extent to which the generation with the largest number of contributions in any year exceeds that of the second largest).

Secondly, the generational schema shows a striking alignment with conventional divisions of the reign of Victoria into sub-periods. The early Victorians overtake the late Georgians as the most featured generation almost exactly at the start of the Victorian period, and are themselves displaced at the start of the 1850s, conventionally seen as the beginning of the mid-Victorian period; and the ascendant mid-Victorians are themselves displaced in the 1870s, the conventional end of the mid-Victorian period. Thereafter the cycles are more confused, something which itself reflects the orthodox judgement that after 1870 the chronology of the Victorian period becomes more uncertain, but the graph still indicates less decisive but still visible transitions in the mid-1880s and around 1900, which align with the four-way periodization of early Victorian, mid-Victorian, 'entracte' and 'late-Victorian' previously offered by Hewitt.[44]

Third, the graphs indicate the extent to which the intellectual and cultural life of each period – as exemplified by the material published in the sample journals – remained multilayered. The extent to which the early and mid-Victorians achieved a dominant position over the years during which they were supplying the largest share of articles is striking. The proportion of early Victorian contributions in any one year peaks at in excess of 60%, and is sustained at over 50% for nearly 15 years. Mid-Victorians are only slightly less preponderant for a slightly shorter period, and even in the more complicated years after 1870, the high Victorians still peak at over 43%. At the same time, previous generations did not disappear at the point at which they were eclipsed. Rather they continued a steady but relatively gradual decline so that it was several decades before their contributions had been reduced to insignificant numbers. The pace of decline varies a little (it is notable that the early Victorians persist more successfully than either the late Georgians or mid-Victorians, and the longevity of high Victorian influence is even more marked). Persistence produced plurality, but also periodizing effects.

[44] See M. Hewitt, 'Introduction: Victorian milestones', in *The Victorian World*, ed. by Hewitt (Routledge, 2012), pp. 1–53.

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The generational plot-lines also offer support for the notion of coherence across the Victorian period as a whole. The combination of the persistence of the early and mid-Victorians, combined with the ability of the high Victorians to delay their decisive eclipse until the very end of the period, implies exactly the sort of cultural stasis and confusion that some contemporaries observed in the later 1880s and 1890s. They described a sense of a lull, a becalming, a certain damning of the historical stream, which the death of Victoria helped to sweep away rapidly in the early years of the twentieth century. As Grant Allen put it in 1882, 'with the solitary and damning exception of Mr. Mallock, it would be hard to name a single writer of the present generation who has achieved even a decent reputation before he was forty'.[45]

Of course longer tails might in part be a function of increases in life expectancy over the century, although this would be expected primarily to stretch the chronological amplitude of each generational cycle. And it might also be in part a function of the life cycle of individual periodicals, something which itself requires much greater exploration as part of a sociology, or perhaps in this case the demography, of the periodical. Periodicals themselves have a tendency to go through a cycle of youth, maturity and aging; stables of contributors were constantly renewed, but the process of renewal was difficult and often required the upheaval of a new owner or editor. The next section therefore turns to examination of individual periodicals.

6. Project 2: *Curran Index* data (with a focus on the *Athenaeum*)

Our second exploration of these dynamics was undertaken using the records of the *Curran Index*. The *Curran* contains attributions to a broader range of journals than the *Wellesley*, but numerically it is dominated by three titles. *Punch* accounts for 80,000 attributions and the *Athenaeum* a further 60,000, data ingested from external projects initially hosted respectively at Liverpool John Moores University and City University, London.[46] Work currently underway on *Chambers's Journal* accounts for a further significant tranche of attributed articles. Our analysis of its data therefore considers these individual periodicals separately. This section explains what can be learnt from *Punch* and *Chambers's Journal*, before turning to focus squarely onto the *Athenaeum*.

Punch, or *The London Charivari*, makes up around 40% of the *Curran Index*'s total attribution data. Nearly half of these attributions are to three writers, Percival Leigh, a founding contributor of *Punch* (14,600 attributions), Sir Francis Cowley Burnand, staff writer then editor of *Punch* (11,000), and Tom Taylor, another *Punch* editor (5600); 270 writers make up the remainder. Figure 4 shows the evolution of the generational shifts in one graph, and highlights how the presence of these three editors/writers may have created an in-built trajectory towards older contributors. For example, the drop in 1870 coincides with the death of the first editor, Lemon, and a decade of changing hands (Shirley Brooks took over but was superseded by Tom Taylor in 1874, then Francis Burnand in 1880, after which age climbs steadily). As explored in the *Athenaeum* case study below, a change in editor might often have meant the bringing in of a new generation of writers, while static editorship has the potential to contribute to a more static, and therefore ageing, stable of writers.

Nevertheless, this graph also highlights some potential pitfalls. In contrast to Hewitt's Wellesley Index titles, *Punch* functioned more like a literary men's club, and relied heavily on an unusually stable and long-term group of salaried contributors.[47] This had distinctive results on the magazine's overall age-profile, as Figure 4 shows (displaying averages weighted by each author's proportion of contributions). A result of this is that the data summarized in the plot is heavily skewed by the inertia created by the persistence of a small core contributor group. The graph also highlights the extent to which the editorial process is entangled with age-effects, and these editorial

[45] Grant Allen, 'The Decay of Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 31 (1882), 349.

[46] Micheline Hancock-Beaulieu and others, 'The Athenaeum Projects: Overview', 1998 <https://athenaeum.city.ac.uk/> [accessed 12 December 2025].

[47] Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (British Library, 2010).

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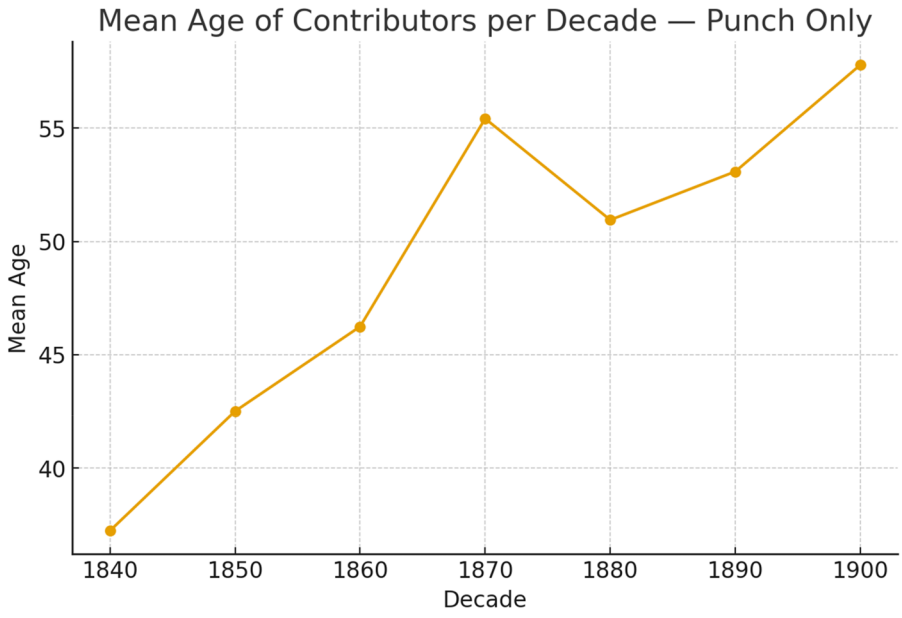


Figure 4 Graph of mean age of contributors per decade in *Punch*.

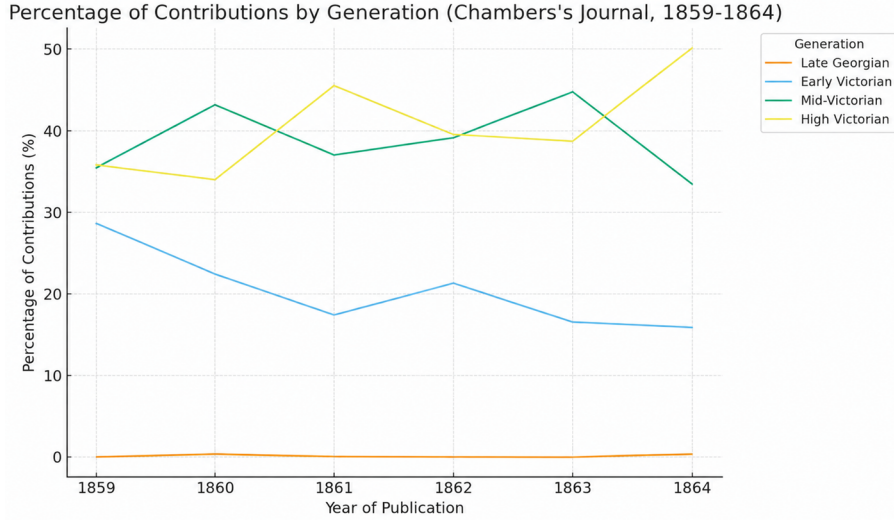


Figure 5 Percentage of contributions by generation, *Chambers's Journal*, 1859–64.

processes are often poorly understood for many journals. Generalizations about age-effects thus need to be buttressed by confidence-inducing research steps which rely on expert knowledge of the context.

Currently the *Curran Index* only contains detailed information on *Chambers's Journal* for a relatively short period (1859–64). In a snapshot of that period, demonstrated in Figure 5, we can get a sense of the generational balance of contributors within the periodical at the time. This Figure shows an almost equal balance of mid and high Victorians across several years in the second half of the so-called 'mid-Victorian period'.

This graph helps to demonstrate that the intellectual life of the mid-Victorian period was constituted not just by the preponderance of the mid-Victorians, but also by the presence of an expiring

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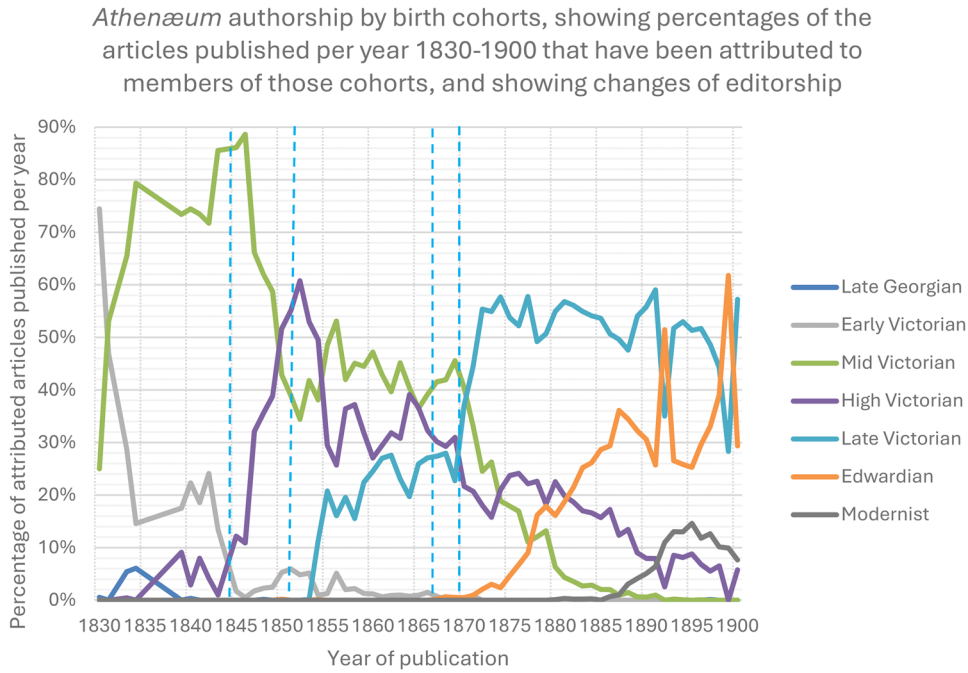


Figure 6 *Athenaeum* authorship by birth cohorts.

late-Georgian input, early Victorians in decline and high Victorians emerging. It was the particularity of this configuration, as much as the peculiarities of the mid-Victorians, which determined the character of these years.

The periodical with the greatest coverage in the *Curran Index*, across the longest period, is the *Athenaeum* (1828–1921). Founded by James Silk Buckingham and based in London, its full title describes itself as a 'journal of literature, science, and the fine arts', and it was predominantly made up of reviews, offering a survey of contemporary learned culture. The *Curran* holds data across 1830–1900, comprising 673 individual contributors (including some overlap with the authors analysed in the *Wellesley* sample), including influential women critics of the time such as Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Emilia Dilke, Jane Harrison and Augusta Webster.[48] The researchers for the original indexing project at City University, London, explain that 'For the first 40 years of *The Athenaeum*, many reviewers wrote prolifically on miscellaneous subjects. As the century went on reviewers became more specialized'.[49] The exclusive focus on reviewers perhaps encourages a narrower and more stable group, or perhaps inclines towards older authors who might be seen as able to offer more authoritative judgement. But the breadth of coverage also reduces the risk of the results being impacted by fluctuations of interest in any particular topic or discipline.

Focusing on the *Athenaeum* allows us to gauge the inner workings, and some reasons behind, the generational patterns within the periodical's authorship. The proportions of the magazine's review articles written by members of each generational group across the period (see Figure 6) strikingly confirm and echo Hewitt's equivalent graph (though without the smoothing effect that Figure 3 acquires from including a spread of periodicals). The similarity between the two graphs is notable, because the *Athenaeum* occupies a different place in the periodical spectrum to those of the *Wellesley Index*. The similarity suggests that Figure 3's generational patterns are not an effect

[48] Marysa Demoor, *Their Fair Share: Women, Power and Criticism in the Athenaeum, from Millicent Garrett Fawcett to Katherine Mansfield, 1870–1920* (Routledge, 2017), doi: 10.4324/9781315363417.

[49] Micheline Hancock-Beaulieu and Susan Holland, 'Indexing The Athenaeum: Aims and Difficulties', *The Indexer*, 17.3 (1991), 167–72 (172), doi: 10.3828/indexer.1991.17.3.7.

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of a particular group of 'serious' monthlies and quarterlies, but are likely to prove valid more generally across periodical authorship.

The few notable differences between Figures 2 and 5 are worth attending to.[50] The dark-red line representing the early Victorian generation (born 1795–1813) dominates even more strongly for the *Athenaeum*, probably because it was a new title in 1828 and so did not have prior long-standing older contributors.[51] The green-coloured high Victorians (born 1830–1845) are similarly more dominant from 1871 in the *Athenaeum* than in Hewitt's wider sample.[52] The flat line of dominance by this particular generation, which continues to the end of the century, might be partially explained by the post-1870 specialization mentioned above, but also suggests a periodical in stagnation. This kind of analysis can allow us to think about the kind of turnover and patterns of authorships associated with different periodicals.

One obvious and important executive power in determining contributors was the editor. Next, therefore, the team turned to considering what difference changes in editorship made to the generational composition of contributors in the *Athenaeum*.[53] Do new editors typically overhaul the stable of contributors, and in specifically generationally structured ways? In Figure 6, overlaid on the data are dotted lines showing the dates at which new editors took over the *Athenaeum*. All four of these coincide with points of notable discontinuity in the generational composition of the contributions to the periodical. These suggest moments at which one generational group loses its hegemony, and another begins to rise in its place.

We can test whether this relationship – between editor and generational spread – is causal or simply correlative, by comparing actuality with what we would expect from life-course and lifespan. It seems that new editors bring in new young contributors, but might that entry point just coincide with when they would be joining the field anyway? Is there a standard 'coming of age'? To investigate this, we examined the age at which contributors published their first *Athenaeum* article, as illustrated in Figure 7 (each dot represents one contributor). The wide vertical range of dots per chronological year shows that there was no standard age at which people joined the contributor list, but instead a very wide range of joining ages. This makes it likely that there might be something more intentional going on when an editor commissioned new contributors for the first time, or decided to give occasional contributors an increased number of commissions. But the relative lack of clear patterns in Figure 7 also suggests that the important question to ask might not be about the singular moment when a contributor first wrote for the journal, but instead one about how frequently a contributor was commissioned.

An alternative approach to visualizing this data is to consider the weighted average age of contributors publishing reviews in the *Athenaeum* in each year across 1830–1900 (see Figure 8). In this case, a stable (or stagnating) contributor base would show visually as a smooth, slow upward trend, rising by one year of age per calendar year. A flat line (as we see in Figure 8 during the 1870s and 1880s) indicates a constant rate of churn and updating of the contributor base. Moments of sharp discontinuity, such as change in direction of the line, suggest a change in policy that resulted in a changed generational composition. (And importantly, this effect is

[50] Some of the differences are due to data availability: the original *Athenaeum* indexing project at City University, London, for example, did not make any attributions for 1832, 1835–38 or 1844, hence Figure 5 does not show any data for these years. The graph's lines of best fit simply join the data between previous and subsequent years.

[51] The exception in 1830 is due to a relative dearth of data for that year: 192 attributions for 1830, compared to 281 for 1831.

[52] The exception to this is two apparent blips in 1892 and 1899, years for which the original project has sparse data: only 237 and 212 attributions respectively, compared to an average of around 1500 per year in the rest of the 1890s. See Gary Simons, 'December, 2019 News', The Curran Index to Nineteenth-Century Periodicals, 2019 <https://www.curranindex.org/news/14/> [accessed 8 December 2025]. The data for these years is therefore less robust; even a small variance in numbers has dramatic effect on the graph.

[53] The *Wellesley* selection is less suitable for addressing this question, not least because its major titles, *Blackwoods*, *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Nineteenth Century* and *The Westminster Review* all had long-serving editors and a stable editorial policy.

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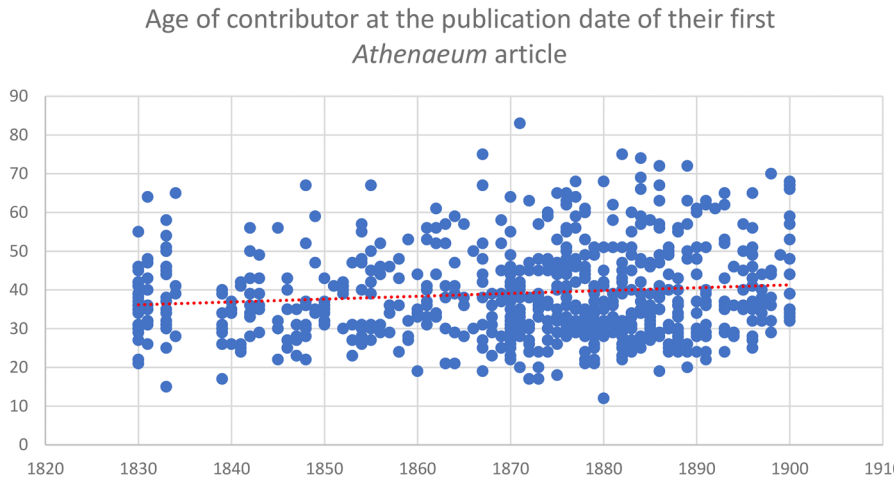


Figure 7 Age of contributor at the publication date of their first *Athenaeum* article.

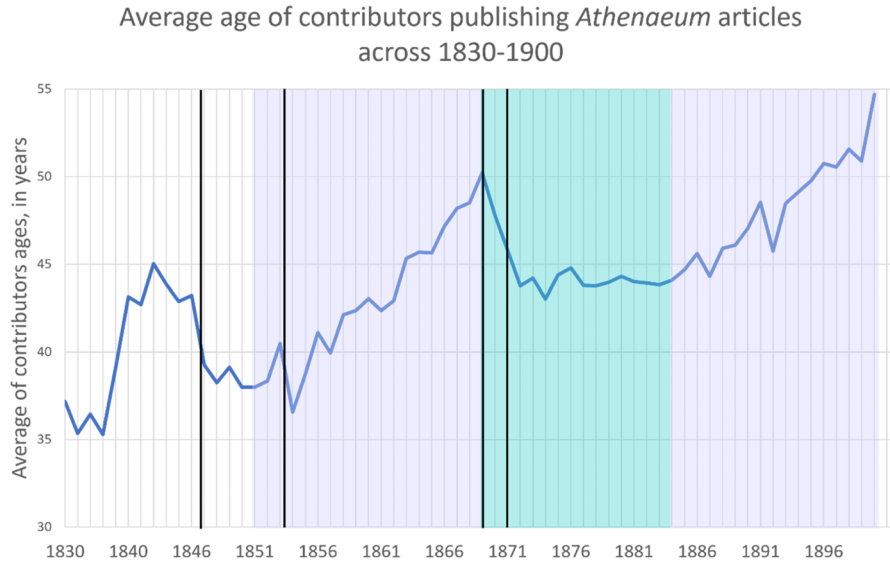


Figure 8 Average age of contributors publishing *Athenaeum* articles across 1830–1900.

not dependent on any pre-definition of generational cohorts of the sort used in Figures 5 and 6.) Figure 8 also includes the dates of editorial changeovers overlaid as vertical black lines. This makes visible the fact that two key points of discontinuity are 1869 and 1871 (when first John Doran and then Norman MacColl took over the editorship), but also some discontinuity at the two other points of editorial change, 1846 and 1853. It does therefore seem that in at least some instances (as is also the case for *Punch*), the new editor did overhaul the contributor base such that it transformed the generational composition of the *Athenaeum*'s 'stable'.

What is surprising are the kinds of generational transformation these new editors bring about. In many respects periodicals acted as an expression of forms of cultural networking, including debating clubs, dining societies and intellectual coteries, which were often strongly generational in character. Contributors were friends, acquaintances and others whose opinions were felt to carry weight, and so we might expect editors, and especially new editors, to draw disproportionally on their own generational cohort. However, on almost all the occasions shown in Table 2, the

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Table 2 Successive Athenaeum editors and the generational cohorts they promoted.

Editor's name	Birth date	Generational cohort	Date commencing editorship	Rising Generational cohort	Diminishing Generational cohort
Charles Wentworth Dilke	1789	Late Georgian	1829	Early Victorian	Late Georgian
T. K. Hervey	1799	Early Victorian	1846	Mid-Victorian	Early Victorian
Hepworth Dixon	1821	Mid-Victorian	1853	High Victorian	Mid-Victorian
John Doran	1807	Early Victorian	1869	High Victorian	Early Victorian
Norman MacColl	1843	High Victorian	1871	Late Victorian	None (High Victorians stay strongly represented)

opposite happened: the editors' own generational cohort fell from prominence. Instead, each editor tended to promote the 'next' generation. For example, Charles Wentworth Dilke (born 1789, and who in Patrick Leary's words 'put the periodical on a sound financial basis' and 'secured to the periodical a reputation for honest and objective reviewing'), in 1846 decided to remain proprietor and advisor, but to pass the editorship to T. K. Hervey (b. 1799).[54] The graph shows this to be a moment of transformational change for the *Athenaeum* contributor base. Hervey was part of the early Victorian generational cohort, but with his arrival at the helm, the early Victorians (purple in Figure 5) immediately lost their hegemonic position, and mid-Victorians (turquoise in Figure 5) began their rise to prominence.

The two slight variations on the pattern come in the form of, firstly, John Doran (b. 1807), the only editor who was older than his predecessor when he took over in 1869 following the death of Dilke. Despite himself being an early Victorian, he oversaw a sharp increase in the proportion of high-Victorian contributions to the magazine, and a concomitant sharp drop in the contributions from his own generation. The other slight variation on the general pattern came two years later in 1871, when Norman MacColl (b. 1843, a high Victorian) took over. His own generation (burnt-orange) stayed strong, but the late Victorians (lilac) also began their rise. In general, therefore, it is most helpful to see the dynamic between editor and contributors not as one driven by group generational identity or conflict with another older or younger generation, but instead one of mentorship.

This analysis indicates the possible play of two different periodizing forces: on the one hand, and operating at the level of an individual title, changes in editorial personality and policy; on the other, and operating at a broader cultural level, shifts from one cultural period to another. The two are not (or at least need not be) entirely distinct. Editorial changes were inevitably influenced by the ageing of individual editors, and may also have been initiated in response to a desire to more effectively represent emerging ideas, beliefs or groups. Further work is needed to extend the examination of the impacts of changes of editor, including patterns of their timing, across a wider range of titles.

[54] Patrick Leary, 'Periodicals: Details of the Athenaeum', The Curran Index to Nineteenth-Century Periodicals <https://www.curranindex.org/periodicals/> [accessed 21 November 2024].

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7. Conclusion

The work presented here is both methodologically and empirically partial and preliminary. In an ideal world, we would be aiming for a single dataset that combines those discussed in this article into a single, interoperable directory of authors of the nineteenth century. This is unlikely to exist in the foreseeable future. Resources like the *Curran*, the *Wellesley* and *At the Circulating Library* were designed long before the development of FAIR data principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable), first published in a scientific context in 2016, with a report on their implications for the humanities published in 2020. This means problems of scale are compounded by fundamental inconsistencies of data integrity and architecture.

In any case, focusing on the FAIR data principles and a single integrated one-stop solution could also have downsides. As Hedley and Kooistra suggest, interoperability necessitates a flattening of data, i.e. reducing it only to the fields shared between databases, and therefore losing the granularity with which creators have enriched our understanding of particular people or publications. (The *Curran*, for example, includes fields on what authors were paid, and supplementary fields about the source of attributions.) However, working with these datasets is a multistage process that entails some reduction to common denominators, and some enrichment beyond the initial fields provided. While reducing to 'thin' description (i.e. only comparable fields) is necessary for interoperability, this article has demonstrated that analysis of numerical data can be enriched by understanding the historical contexts of people and periodicals, and the context of the dataset from which the numbers derive. Indeed, it is not possible to understand these kinds of data sources without that 'thick' description.

What is needed is the ability to ask questions across databases, and to build up a picture – if not fully representative, then at least additive – of Victorian authorship. The authors hope to develop their investigations with this broad aim in mind. Work is currently underway to extend the range of analysis possible for *Chambers's Journal*, extending the transcription of the author ledgers of the journal into the *Curran Index* to at least 1875.[55] This will allow a detailed analysis of the authorship of the journal for the period when it was edited by the popular novelist and man of letters, James Payn. This will provide a dataset of a further 5000 articles for a periodical which was never dominated by a tight *Punch*-style coterie. This will be sufficient for a close analysis of the composition of authorship under a single editor, of the sort Eileen Curran called for. The way Payn's editorship straddled the late 1860s will also allow further exploration of the extent to which generational supersession was taking place even while a single editor held the reins.

Our next step is to link the *Curran Index*'s *Athenaeum* author records with the Integrated Census Micro-Data (I-CeM) for the British decennial censuses of 1851–1891. Linking authors to their census records opens up access to those records' information about (among other things) family and household structures, occupations, and location. Demographers have developed increasingly sophisticated tools for linking individuals across sequential censuses, opening up opportunities for diachronic analyses such as of migration and social mobility. Protocols are not yet established for linking I-CeM with other datasets, so this team is currently developing those, in the process of linking I-CeM records to authorship records from the *Curran Index*.[56]

Linking the *Curran Index* records for these 673 periodical contributors to their census records allows us to analyse aspects including how they self-described their occupation, and their patterns of migration across the life-course and across their authorial careers. Ultimately, we aim to find ways to analyse the language of literary texts (as did Underwood et al.) in tandem with

[55] Funded by a small grant from the Curran Fellowship fund of the RSVP.

[56] Helen Kingstone et al., 'The benefits of linking authorship data and census data', in preparation (funded by a British Academy Talent Development Award). Significantly, even Laurence Brockliss and Harry Smith's recent *Male Professionals in Nineteenth Century Britain. Families, Intergenerational Mobility, and the Rise of the Professions* (Oxford University Press, 2024) proceeded by the creation of its own bespoke dataset rather than attempt to mine the I-CeM material.

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demographic data. Initial steps within this could include topic modelling of articles in these journals, to see to what extent generation had an impact on content. The *Curran* contains only titles, which were often formulaic and do not lend themselves to analysis ('Essence of Parliament' being a regular feature of *Punch*, for example), but can indicate shifts that might correlate in interesting ways with generational cohorts. It might also be possible to explore the likely reading material of a generation who went on to write for periodicals decades later.

For the moment, enough has been done here to show that attending to even the most basic feature of the life-course – age – has the potential to open out new ways of interrogating the nature and experience of authorship, and especially periodical authorship, in Victorian Britain. These analyses become particularly fruitful when we take into account the ways that age and ageing do not take place in a solely biological chronology. We have attended here to historically and culturally informed age, treating it as clustered into perceptibly different generational experiences. We are very open to a revision, on the basis of further data, of the birth-date-spans drawn up by Hewitt and outlined in Table 1. For now, this provisional schema has shown that generational analysis can help shed light on the churn in periodicals' contributor bases, and how a change in editor might affect that.

In this article, we have focused on the issue of intergenerational dynamics within Victorian periodical culture. We hope to have shown the potential of such a focus for a sociology of periodical authorship, while at the same time showcasing some of the methodological and analytical challenges of such an investigation. The kinds of analyses employed here have the potential to transform our understandings of how periodicals operated, the nature of the materials they circulated, and the role they played in cultural periodization. And while long-established categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity will continue to be vital axes of analysis, we will not understand these questions or dynamics without a much greater attention to age and, in consequence, also to generation.

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Author contributions

Martin Hewitt: worked on conceptualization, funding acquisition, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, writing (initial full article schema and draft of opening sections, review and editing). Helen Kingstone: worked on conceptualization, funding acquisition, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, writing (original draft from 'The Role of Age-Effects' section onwards (except for the 'Project 1' section; review and editing)). Emily Middleton: data curation (*Curran*), formal analysis and visualization (of *Curran* data/*Chambers's*/*Punch*), literature review, writing (review and editing). Pieter François: worked on conceptualization, funding acquisition, writing (review and editing).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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